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RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4148  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 000780

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INSB

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/06/2019  
TAGS: PGOV PREL PREF PHUM EAID CE

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR JAFFNA MUNICIPAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS  
- FREE AND FAIR??

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES JAMES R. MOORE. REASONS: 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Jaffna Municipal Council elections will be held on Saturday, August 8, the first elections in the Jaffna area since 2004. The government is paying close attention to this election, sending a number of ministers to campaign there alongside Douglas Devananda, leader of the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP). Devananda has been reluctantly persuaded by the President to run his candidates under the UPFA party symbol and name, to the dismay of many of his long-time local supporters. Most observers feel the government called these elections quickly in order to get a Tamil electorate "stamp of approval" on their actions since the end of the war. Some normalcy has returned to Jaffna in the past two months, with bus service starting up, some commercial trucking allowed, decreased curfews and a lifting of many fishing restrictions. However, many local citizens remain deeply skeptical of the government, and suspect these improvements will be taken away if the UPFA candidates do not win. Residents are also concerned that even if the UPFA candidates win and restrictions continue to be lifted, the government will allow significant Sinhalese colonization in the area, and promote economic development that favors Sinhalese businessmen over local Tamils. Most residents believe the UPFA candidates are likely to win, and a survey of local voters two weeks prior to the election, conducted by the Colombo-based Center for Policy Alternatives (CPA), gave UPFA the highest percentage of support by a wide margin. This same survey also showed a high number of undecided voters and voters who would not divulge their choice. It is not clear how high voter turnout will be. There are lingering fears that Devananda's EPDP forces will resort to voter fraud if nervous about the possible results. Fueling suspicions, a large number of voter cards have been returned to the post office as undeliverable. In reality, the degree of control the government exercises over the Jaffna area precludes these elections from being a contest between truly representative political figures. End Summary.

OVERALL LIVING CONDITIONS IMPROVE...

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12. (C) During a recent visit to Jaffna two weeks prior to Municipal Council Elections, PolOff heard from local residents and civic leaders that some improvements in basic living conditions had appeared over the past two months since the end of the war. The curfew at night had been reduced significantly, and now lasts only from 11:00 PM until 4:30 AM. Fishing restrictions had been relaxed to allow outboard motorboats, and while permits were still needed and required a 1-2 month waiting period, once granted a fishing permit was now good indefinitely, instead of simply for three months as had been the case previously. In an economy that was historically based to a large degree on fishing, this appeared to be a significant improvement, and some contacts spoke of the potential now of selling fish to the markets in Colombo. The Jaffna Government Agent said he expected fishing totals in the area to increase tenfold this year, reaching possibly as much as 50% of pre-1983 production levels. Trucks had now been allowed for a number of weeks through to Jaffna from the South on the A-9 highway, with an increase in consumer goods in stores, and fruits now in markets from other areas of the island which had not been seen for some time. Fuel prices had just been lowered, although most people appear to still travel by bicycle. There were frequent power outages during PolOff's visit. Bus service resumed during the two weeks prior to the elections, and a team of 8 Chinese engineers were in Jaffna during PolOff's visit to assess the condition of the railway line into Jaffna from the South. (Note: When asked if they expected reconstruction of the railway would begin soon, the

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engineers replied that would depend on financing.) Local residents seemed to be cautiously optimistic that living conditions will continue to improve, and indeed the CPA survey found that 44% of respondents thought their quality of life would improve over the next 3 years, with 37% unsure.

...BUT PROBLEMS AND FEARS REMAIN

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13. (C) Despite of these recent improvements, residents and local leaders expressed considerable unhappiness about current conditions. Many complained that these recent improvements were only due to the upcoming election, and said they were certain the improvements would disappear if the governing coalition's candidates did not win. Leaders in the fishing village of Point Pedro said that although many fishing restrictions had been lifted, larger trawlers based in Colombo had recently begun fishing for month-long stretches in the local waters, catching the larger fish and storing them on ice on board their boats while the local fisherman were confined to smaller boats and had to return to shore every morning to deliver their catch to local markets. They complained that any trucks delivering fish and produce for sale in the South would likely be owned by southerners, and shipping fees would be unfairly high. Citizens and local leaders alike in both Jaffna and Point Pedro expressed underlying fears of Sinhalese colonization, both literal and economic. Many are convinced that the government will set up military bases all over the North and expropriate land for soldiers' families and other permanent Sinhalese settlers from the South, in part in a bid to change the voter demographics of the Tamil areas. They fear any investment opportunities for economic development in the area will be reserved for outsiders, either Sinhalese businessmen from Colombo or foreigners from China and elsewhere. Locals in and around Jaffna stated universally that it was necessary for Tamils to have political power to preserve their culture. Indeed the CPA poll showed that when asked what three factors were most important to voters in selecting a Municipal Council candidate, 51% replied it was the candidate's ability to preserve the culture of Tamil society, the most important factor by a large margin.

DOUGLAS DEVANANDA - A PARTY MAN?

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14. (C) Although Douglas Devananda has long been a fixture of local politics in Jaffna with his Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), President Rajapaksa persuaded Devananda to have his local candidates run under the governing UPFA coalition. Local civic leaders told PolOff that many EPDP supporters were bitterly disappointed at this. The Catholic Bishop of Jaffna (please protect) said he had met with Devananda just after that decision was made, and he appeared very sad about it, complaining that he had spent many years building up his own party and it was now being subsumed into the President's party. Many observers felt that President Rajapaksa was taking over the EPDP just as he had previously done with Karuna's TMVP in Eastern Sri Lanka. Although Devananda himself is not running for office in this local election, it is his image that has been used most often by the UPFA in local campaigning, and many felt this was just a precursor to what would happen if Provincial Council elections were held in the North.

HIGH LEVEL OF OUTSIDE ATTENTION,  
HEAVY GOVERNMENT CAMPAIGNING

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15. (C) PolOff heard disbelief from a number of locals at how much outside attention this local election was receiving,

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including the PolOff visit itself. A number of government ministers have traveled recently to the area, appearing always with Devananda and his local candidates. Senior Advisor to the President Basil Rajapaksa has visited on several occasions during the campaign, each time announcing the lifting of a restriction or the restoration of a service such as civilian bus travel to the South. The fate of the IDPs has also become a campaign issue. When visiting the Ramavil IDP camp outside of the town of Jaffna, PolOff asked a group of about twenty IDPs who they would vote for if they were from Jaffna. They all quickly said they would support whoever got them out of the camps. The UPFA campaign seems to have picked up on this line of thinking, as some 3,000 IDPs from the camps in Vavuniya were reportedly returned home to relatives in Jaffna on August 5th, with a campaign style event arranged at a sports stadium in town for their arrival.

The event was attended by Basil Rajapaksa and Douglas Devananda, and one of the local UPFA candidates allegedly put out a press release the same day stating that he had been responsible for the IDPs' release.

16. (C) Campaign posters, most of which were from the UPFA coalition, were evident throughout Jaffna. They featured photos of Devananda, often shown with President Rajapaksa or with the A-9 highway in the background. Some of these posters had the UPFA name and symbol blacked out by unknown vandals, possibly unhappy EPDP supporters, and other parties' posters were sometimes completely painted over. Mr. Kanamayailnathan, Chief Editor of the local Uthayan newspaper, said the TNA had done only minimal campaigning, with some TNA Members of Parliament complaining that they were not given sufficient permission to travel to Jaffna to campaign effectively.

LITTLE MEDIA COVERAGE, FEW REPORTS OF VIOLENCE

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17. (C) There has been little independent media coverage of the election campaigns, with most reports coming either from Tamilnet sources or GSL press statements. Uthayan Chief Editor Kanamayailnathan said there are few local reporters left in Jaffna, with many of the more senior reporters having left to go abroad. Young journalists have also either left or taken other jobs. Outside media watchdog groups, including Reporters Sans Frontieres, complained that the GSL was specifically not allowing reporters to travel to Jaffna to cover the elections. The GSL countered that there is

little interest by local Sri Lankan press in the election, and that very few international journalists have expressed interest as well. The GSL stated that reporters were not specifically denied access to Jaffna, but rather were simply required to get travel permission from the Ministry of Defense just as any other visitor to the Jaffna area would be. As of two days prior to the election there were no reports of significant violence during the campaign.

#### THE ELECTION

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18. (C) The consensus among those who met with PolOff was that Devananda's candidates, running under the UPFA symbol and party name, will win the election quite handily. The CPA sponsored poll showed 23.8 % support for UPFA, with the next highest party at 7.3%. This same poll listed 44.7% as undecided and 22.3% as refusing to answer, so there is still some uncertainty about voter turnout and final results. While EPDP has been suspected of using fraud in past elections in the Jaffna area, it was unclear if they will resort to that this time around. Instead they may rely on the fear that recent improvements in Jaffna will disappear if Devananda's people are not elected, and on a sense that

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Devananda can bring home spoils if he and his local party members come into power. CPA's poll showed that a full 27.5% of voters would choose candidates because they had received benefits of some sort from that candidate or their party. In a meeting with PolOff, the Assistant Commissioner of Elections expressed confidence that his team could conduct the election without any problems. He said they will have extra elections officials on hand, and are prepared for any complaints to be handled quickly and appropriately. There were reports that a large number of polling cards for the district were returned to the post office as undeliverable, leading to fears by some that these cards might be used by imposters to stuff ballot boxes with fraudulent votes.

#### LOCALS SAY SECURITY FORCES THE REAL POLITICAL POWER

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19. (C) Locals who met with PolOff almost uniformly said that ultimately this election mattered little, as the only people with real political power in the Jaffna area are the government security forces. The government still holds complete control over which people and what goods can get in and out of the Jaffna area, maintains frequent checkpoints and curfews to control the local population, and holds the ability to determine use of land through high security zones and demining priorities. Locals often said this upcoming election would serve only to allow President Rajapaksa to claim that Tamils in the area supported him and his conduct of the country since the end of the war.

#### COMMENT

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10. (C) While foreign governments and NGOs have called on the government to ensure that the local elections in Jaffna and Vavuniya are "free and fair", it is evident that much more than simply holding an election is required to politically enfranchise citizens, even if all parties are allowed to run for office and no overt voter fraud occurs. The level of control the government exercises over all that happens in Jaffna is ultimately very high, whether through the security forces based there, the access ordinary citizens and opposition politicians have to visit or leave the area freely, the economic activity and development that is allowed to occur in the area, and of course the way in which the massive numbers of IDPs are handled. Whatever political solution is eventually proposed by President Rajapaksa, citizens in the Jaffna area are unlikely to feel they have even the possibility of truly representative political officials until these overarching controls are substantially

reduced. End Comment.  
MOORE